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The Children's Place in the Library

ONE of the marked contrasts between the Public Library of the middle 19th century and that of the present lies in its relation to boys and girls. True, the founders of the Boston Public Library were keenly conscious of the needs of young people, yet it was not of children they thought when they wrote:

"Why should not this prosperous and liberal city extend some reasonable amount of aid to the foundation and support of a noble public library to which the young people of both sexes when they leave the schools can resort for those works which pertain to general culture, or which are needful for research into any branch of useful knowledge."

"Small children except when in the company of parents should be totally excluded," we read in the Annual Report for 1865, and in justification of this edict, "Small children are seen not infrequently carrying away more books and larger ones than they can conveniently hold. One of your committee saw on a rainy day two small girls carrying five books and holding them in such a way that it was evident that a very small accident would throw some of the five volumes into the gutter."

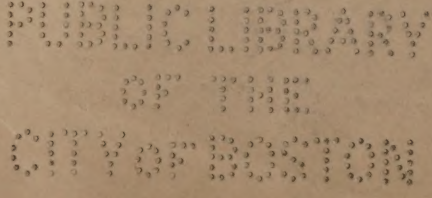
Plainly these small children, debarred from the lawful possession of library cards, had ways of their own for surmounting obstacles. The Annual Report for 1866 relates this incident, which has a strangely familiar sound:

"One boy sold his father's card to another boy, who lent it to a third who lost both books and card, but the three boys came to the Library and united to pay for the books lost."

Under the rules of the Library at this time, children under eighteen years of age were not permitted to have cards of their own, but in the following year the limit was reduced to sixteen, and it is reported that one-half of the frequenters of the Lower Hall were minors.

Three years later Boston began to plume herself on her liberal policy. The report for 1869 comments on the experience of another city which records the small amount of wear and tear on its books, with the conclusion that the reason "would seem clear enough in the fact that two-thirds of their readers are over age, owing to a rule that requires a minor to bring a request from his parents before a volume of fiction will be delivered to him! It does seem rather strange," adds our Boston report, "that a man of twenty should have to bring his father's permit before he is allowed to read a volume of Ivanhoe!"

Writing in 1872 when the children of Boston had become constant patrons of the Library, the Trustees thus made note of a new conviction: "Changes which strongly indicate the abiding of the Central Library in its present site must also lead to others at no very distant future, such as an addition to the building in the



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rear, which shall contain a juvenile library and reading room with an entrance on Van Rensselaer Place, whereby the main entrance and the front hall may be at certain hours relieved from the crowd of youth of both sexes."

Twenty years were to elapse before the Children's Room so confidently predicted became a thing of reality. Meanwhile the policy grew more liberal, the age limit for card holders was reduced, books were sent to the schools, and readers over fourteen, so long as they were of "orderly conduct," were admitted to the Reading Room. Yet with abundant evidence of their insatiable thirst for reading, no provision was made for the accommodation of boys and girls in the plans for the new library building in Copley Square.

Many references in the records, however, indicate the gradual advance in thought toward the modern fully equipped children's department. For example, in 1882 the Examining Committee reported as follows:

"Nothing is now left undone in the way of helping young and old both to obtain suitable books and to work their way up to the best kinds of reading. The assistants have attempted with great success to suggest books to boys and girls who did not know what to call for, and to guide them in the selection when this was advisable. This service has largely reduced the reading of worthless books. It has helped young people to discriminate in the choice of suitable reading. It has called forth in many instances the gratitude of parents. It has done more to improve and lift up the popular use of the Library than any other agency that has yet been employed."

For a few weeks after entering the present Library building the staff was at a loss to care for the troop of children drawn by a beauty and spaciousness suggesting untold wealth of new reading material. Then in May, 1895, less than two months after the opening of the building, the librarian, Mr. Herbert Putnam, set apart a room on the second floor, and appointed it the Children's Room.

An open-shelf room where children could take down the books and choose what they would was a new idea thirty-two years ago. It was a far-seeing policy not only to put at once upon the shelves of that new room a liberal collection of children's books, but to add to that nucleus a considerable number of books not specifically written for children, to be handled with equal informality.

For sustained and rewarding use of a public library by children three things are necessary; a discriminating selection of books, suitable and attractive reading rooms, and intelligent methods of introducing books to readers. All new books to be purchased for the Children's Department of the Boston Public Library are taken on approval and read with careful attention. No library could buy or would wish to buy everything that is included on the juvenile lists issued each year by the many publishing firms throughout the country. To choose those that are most worth while is an exacting, but also a fascinating task. The unfolding minds of children, reaching always a little farther ahead, grasping parts of a complicated whole and ignoring other parts, surrounding the commonplace with a glamor of mystery and romance, are a challenge to the librarian who is conscious of the effect of mediocrity.

Since good reading habits may be early established, the Public Library necessarily buys a certain number of books that will train the child in the mechanics

PUBLIC LIBRARY
NOT TO
BE TAKEN AWAY

of reading and thus supplement the early work of the schools. Such books are simple in content and are seldom to be classed as literature. More important than these, however, is the far larger group of books that aid the mental development of young people, by opening new channels of thought, by fostering a feeling for the beauty of language, by presenting ideals that strengthen character. The books that do this are many and varied, they comprise the best books written for children, together with a large group of standard literature for the general reader, and that small assemblage of universal books which is ageless in appeal. There should be opportunity for adventuring in books that kindle enthusiasm, disclose new worlds of fancy, that help a reader to realize his own intellectual relationships. In order to discern what books possess in the highest degree the power of thus freeing the spirit of young people, the children's librarian must first of all acquire a sense of values. Even then, there will be surprises.

Turning back to the beginning of organized work with children in the Boston Public Library, it is pleasant to find that the standard list of books, about 1000 in number, approved in 1895 for the Central Library was duplicated for the Branches in different parts of the city. When this wise step toward coördination was taken there were eleven Branch libraries in the city of Boston. In most of these a separate room for children was out of the question at that time, but as the old buildings are superseded by modern structures a children's room is planned in each one. A suitable environment has much to do with establishing a becoming respect for the library in the minds of its younger members. Rooms that attract by their cheerfulness and comfort are more likely to produce an atmosphere conducive to quiet reading. A sunny location is desirable, specially adapted furniture adds comfort, appropriate pictures and decorations with warmth and color make the surroundings more homelike. But for any library the best furnishing is an adequate supply of books in good editions and in good condition.

By reason of its central location the Children's Room in the main Library has become widely known and loved.

"I have come fifteen hundred miles this summer to show my daughter the room I loved as a child," said one visitor.

"La salle aux petits garçons," as one little boy called it, often arouses the liveliest interest in visitors from overseas. "Who brings these children here?" is a frequent question and the voluntary presence of so many unconscious readers is a matter of surprise and delighted approval.

Some seven years ago, in 1920, the *Christian Register* thus made mention of a single instance of the influence of the Children's Room in the Central Library:

"Unconsciously a little Boston urchin played a large part in opening up a new world to thousands of children in devastated Belgium and France. How? He simply walked into the Public Library to look at pictures and to read. On his way down the long corridor he passed a man, who, surprised at meeting such a small boy in the large building, turned and followed him. The child entered the children's room, where he seemed at once perfectly at home. The man was M. René Sand, Professor in the University of Brussels, and delegate to the Child Welfare Conference last May. Never before in all his life had he seen a room in a library set apart for children.

"Now M. Sand is working hard in order to give Belgian and French boys and girls the chance to look at gay picture books and to read in sunny rooms as nearly as possible like the one to which the eager little boy led him in Boston."

Under the existing rules of the Library, when a child reaches the third grade in school he may have a borrower's card if he can write his name. At the present time there are over twenty thousand card holders under sixteen years of age, who drew from the Library for home use last year over a million and a half books. How do they choose their books? Sometimes it is by color and shape, sometimes it is by the presence of pictures. But often the most influential factor is the recommendation of a friend. Herein lies an opportunity for the understanding librarian who knows books and who also possesses the key of right approach to boys and girls, without didacticism, without forcing her own likes upon a reader who would choose for himself.

For introducing books to groups of children the Library finds no method to compare with the story hour. That the story hour supplies a need is evident to one who sees, week after week, the rooms well filled with children who leave their play and come of their own free will for the sheer delight of hearing well told stories of imagination and heroic achievement. When we hear it said that boys nowadays do not care to read about knights, we only wish the speakers could see the absorbed attention of library groups as they hear such a tale as "The Drawing of the Sword," or could mark the insistent demands that follow for "another knight story."

The work of the Boston Public Library with the children of Boston is never finished. There will always be abundant room for healthful growth and expansion. So long as even one of the major Branches is unprovided with a satisfactory and well equipped room for boys and girls to read in, the Library will be keenly conscious of the lack. Each new generation will have its own point of view, each individual his personal reaction to a given book. Fortunately, the field of literature is so richly diversified that there is something for every need and every taste in a great collection of books. Any community will be the gainer if its young people grow up as shareholders in the benefits and responsibilities of membership in a live public library.

ALICE M. JORDAN

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